

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

PTSD and Marital Satisfaction in Military Service Members: Examining the Simultaneous Roles of Childhood Sexual Abuse and Combat Exposure

Miller, A. B., Schaefer, K. E., Renshaw, K. D., & Blais, R. K. (2013). PTSD and marital satisfaction in military service members: Examining the simultaneous roles of childhood sexual abuse and combat exposure. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 37(11), 379-385. doi:10.1016/j.chiabu.2013.05.006

SUMMARY: Survey data from National Guard and Reserve Service members were utilized to examine the role of childhood sexual abuse on both posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptom severity and marital satisfaction while accounting for the well-known predictor of combat exposure to both outcomes. Results suggest that child sexual abuse has unique, independent effects on both PTSD symptom severity and marital satisfaction.

KEY FINDINGS:

- The association of childhood sexual abuse with PTSD symptom severity and marital satisfaction appears to be independent of combat exposure.
- Childhood sexual abuse and PTSD symptom severity both had negative effects on marital satisfaction, while combat exposure had no significant effect on marital satisfaction.
- Childhood sexual abuse and combat exposure both had negative, indirect effects (through PTSD symptom severity) on marital satisfaction.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Educate military couples regarding how PTSD symptoms and a history of child sexual abuse may impact marital relationships and satisfaction
- Offer support groups to Service members and their families who are coping with the adverse impact of childhood sexual abuse on relationship functioning
- Publish information regarding resources and services available to military families who have experience childhood sexual abuse

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend training for program staff working with military families about the adverse impact of child sexual abuse on both Service members individually and on their relationships
- Continue to support programs and services that help military couples cope with childhood sexual abuse and combat exposure
- Support programs that screen for mental health issues following deployment

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METHODS

- Participants were recruited from eight voluntary workshops on marital relationships offered to Utah National Guard/Reserve Service Members in 2007 and 2008.
- Service members completed questionnaires, and responses from married participants who reported a deployment between 2001 and 2008 were included in the analysis.
- Approximately 490 Service members attend the workshops and 270 opted to participate in the current study.

PARTICIPANTS

- Two hundred eighteen National Guard or Reserve Veterans deployed between 2001-2008 to Iraq (65%), Afghanistan (20%), other Middle East locations (8%), and non-Middle East locations (8%).
- Sample was 98% male, 91% White (7% self-identified Latino/Latina), 80% Army, and 20% Air Force.
- Seven percent (n = 15) endorsed a history of childhood sexual abuse.

LIMITATIONS

- The highly homogeneous nature of the sample limits generalizability to other populations.
- Causal determinations were not possible due to the design; only presence of associations between variables could be determined.
- Only 15 participants (7%) reported a history of childhood sexual abuse, and this relatively small percentage was used as a basis for comparison with the 93% who did not report childhood sexual abuse.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Continue to examine how childhood sexual abuse experiences impact military and post-military functioning
- Include a more diverse (gender, military branch, ethnicity, marriage status) sample to improve representative value of findings
- Examine the effects of more recent military sexual trauma on psychological functioning and relational satisfaction

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